

be just a little bit ahead of their time; the war of all against all could be just about about to begin.”

“Hell,” said the sergeant, “I never thought to see it in my lifetime – leastways, not unless the nukes started falling. But I guess that could happen too, if we ever figure out just who it is that’s attacking us. If things go on the way they are...”

“They’ll have contingency plans back in Washington,” said Carmichael. “In Washington, they have contingency plans for everything. That’s the place to be, when the going gets tough. Let’s get back there as soon as we can, hey?”

The sergeant stood up. “I’ll tell the men. How soon d’you want to hit the road?”

“I’ve got nothing else to do here,” Carmichael told him. “I can be ready in an hour.”

“You look a little rough,” Andrews observed. “Not as rough as me, but rough enough.”

“Lack of sleep,” said Carmichael, although his fingers came up reflexively to touch the wound on his chest where the anaesthetic dart had hit him. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll catch a little in the back of the lorry, once we’re on the road to the airfield.”

The sergeant nodded, and went to the door. As he

opened it, he looked back. “This really was a wild goose chase, wasn’t it?” he asked. “There was nothing here to find – we were just sent out here to put up some kind of show.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Carmichael consciencelessly.

“Sending us out on a job like that was a pretty stupid thing to do, wasn’t it?” said Andrews. “Considering how ugly things are getting.”

“I guess it was –” Carmichael was already beginning to think hard about how much of what Abel and Franklin had told him was really believable, and how much was likely to be lies – and what, in any case, he ought to tell his superiors back east. It was a difficult puzzle, with many facets, but he had every confidence that in due course he would find the best way to fit the pieces together. The best way, that is, for him. As he had just told Sergeant Andrews, the war of all against all was just about to begin.

Andrews was still looking at him, and he realized that he had let the last sentence dangle, as though he were about to follow it up with some profound remark. “But things could get uglier yet,” he added regretfully. “A whole lot uglier.”

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ance as she walked to a table: Nadia dancing at me; her hand on my thigh as we drove; turning with that mad marigold eye and asking from the rainshadow, “Do you believe in flying?”

I had then.

Her keepers came in right on her heels. No more discreet distances; I guess that stain on the wall had really scared Crooked Finger. I walked around the bar, straight to Nadia’s table.

She smiled. “I’ll have another of those Prairie Fires.”

I remembered the taste of tequila on her mouth. “Outside,” I said. “Not the parking lot. The patio.”

She raised her eyebrows, but got up and walked in front of me, outside. The air smelled of the honey-suckle Talulah had trained over the trellis.

She reached for me. My blood leaped like a wild thing and there was nothing more I wanted than to put myself under those hands, feel her cool dry palms whispering over my skin, but I moved away.

She tilted her head, considered me. “Not tonight, Josephine?”

I almost changed my mind; she seemed so utterly normal, standing there with that puzzled look on her face. “I trusted you,” I said.

She understood immediately: I knew. Her eyes were hooded. “The first time we met, I told you: never trust a stranger.”

“You can’t absolve yourself of responsibility like that, with words. I did trust you. And what of your words in the park? ‘Trust me,’ you said, ‘trust me enough not to ask for my number.’ Trust you! What about trusting me? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you wouldn’t have loved me.”

“You can’t know that! You lied to me. You said the guards were there to protect you.” *Is that why you have the guards?* I had asked. *To make sure you stay safe?* And she had laughed. At me. At my naïveté, my eagerness to believe what she told me. “But they weren’t, were they? You have guards to protect people like me from you. That woman who came into my apartment was relieved because I was still alive: she thought the plaster stain on the wall was my blood. After all, you’ve already killed one person, they were going to put you away forever for it, so why not kill me too?”

“I would never kill you,” she said quietly.

“I don’t know that! How can I trust you when you’ve already lied to me so many times?”

“I never lied. You believed what you wanted.”

“And you think that’s not lying? That’s a solipsism worthy of a child, not a grown woman! You knew what I believed, you knew it was untrue, that’s pure deception.”

“I would never hurt you,” Nadia said again, and she sounded alone and vulnerable and my heart almost broke.

“But you... I...” I just didn’t know what to say. This woman had killed a man, and I still loved her. “Please, tell me what happened.”

“I have a psychiatric condition that manifests itself in a confusion between sex and death. An active confusion. It’s complicated by the fact that I also have a physiological condition, a brain imbalance that’s affected by electrical storms.”

“Don’t. Don’t quote at me. Tell me...” What? What

